

Stars by Rosy_el

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Summary:

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Stars

Author's Note:

Fluff; as promised. This one is longer so that's exciting!

September, 1987

Eleven's hand was enveloped tightly in Mike's as they waded through the thick expanse of trees. Her delicate voice sliced at the silence; "Where are we going?" Mike watched her from the corner of his eye as she tugged her knitted green cardigan sleeve away from a snarled branch.

His laugh came out breathy and he gently tugged her along. "We're close, I swear."

"Don't swear."

Mike laughed again, more audible this time. "Not—not like that, El. This type of swear is like a promise." His face crumpled slightly as he realized he didn't want to taint their special word (*promise*) by associating it with a word El didn't like (*swear*). When El thought of the word 'swear' she thought of the ugly taunts that spilled out of Lucas and Dustin's mouths from time to time. Curse words. "But it's not as serious or strong as a promise."

He stopped at a fallen tree, where giant surrounding roots were strangling the molded wood corpse. "Here," he placed a tentative hand on the small of El's back, "step up." He followed her over. A wind swept through the woods, rattling the crisp September leaves that hung along the trees. "Alright, this is it. The perfect clearing."

"For the stars," El whispered, eyeing the sky that was now visible overhead.

"Right," Mike rubbed at his neck before unceremoniously wringing out the massive flannel blanket he had had folded tightly in his arms. El put her small hands patiently atop his own calloused ones before

picking up the opposite corners of the blanket and laying it carefully atop the leaf-covered ground. He grinned crookedly at her and then looked at the blanket. "Want to, uh," his cheeks suddenly flamed, "lay down?"

Eleven examined Mike. No, El gazed at him. He looked so pretty to her.

"*Not pretty*," Mike had tried explaining after El had studied his newest school picture and announced her opinion. "*Girls are pretty. Boys are... handsome.*" It had made him flustered to tell her that—he certainly didn't associate himself with that description; handsome. Mike couldn't understand what made El look at him the way she did when he caught her eye across the dinner table or during a particularly heated campaign or just while walking to school. But he knew he didn't want it to ever stop.

'Handsome' didn't really stick for El. It didn't do Mike Wheeler justice. He was so pretty—all milk skin and inky, midnight hair that curled at his neck.

Wordlessly, per usual El, she made her way to the itchy blanket and laid down.

The lump in Mike's throat sunk as he swallowed hard. El's chestnut locks haloed around her head in soft waves. Those big brown eyes that seemed to weaken Mike's knees all too easily were tethered to the coal-colored sky that draped above them.

Eleven. His Eleven. He'd give up a million star-painted skies for her. Even for a moment of her. It would be worth it. He knew it would. He couldn't understand why she clung to him the way she did because she was *Eleven*. She was a superhero who saved him time and time again and never even thought twice about it. She was a mystery with soft lips and curious eyes and a laugh that made his heart stop.

El tugged her cardigan tighter around her shoulders. "Are you cold, El?" Mike asked lightly, already pulling off his wool jacket quite hurriedly. The motion brought a pink tinge to El's rounded cheeks and her wide eyes watched, frozen, as Mike wrapped the jacket around her small frame. He looked back at her face, obsidian eyes

gliding down to meet El's mouth.

He felt blood creep up his neck and his cheeks, his dusting of freckles nearly disappearing under the blush, eyes settling back on the twinkling sky above. Eleven laid her head on Mike's chest, fingertips tracing the stripes that lined his shirt. Her head raised and fell with each breath Mike took, which were shallow and labored—Mike unable to tear his thoughts from the wavy chocolate hair that fell from El's head and tickled his neck. She hardly noticed, watching the blackish outline of trees overhead sway in the nighttime breeze.

"Tell me about constellations," El murmured. Mike felt her lips move on his chest.

Mike searched the sky, biology and chemistry were his strong suits—not astronomy. But he'd even make up constellations if it meant fulfilling El's request. Hell, he'd lasso the moon if she asked. He glanced at a certain cluster and remembered suddenly, "There, a little to the left of Cassiopeia, I think. That's Perseus and Andromeda."

El hummed and Mike felt it buzz through him. He wrapped an arm underneath Eleven's elbow and across her curved waist and swallowed.

"Perseus," Mike started in, hands clammy from placing his arm around the soft girl lying beside—and a little bit on top of—him, "had just come back from killing Medusa, this scary lady with snakes for hair and the power to freeze people with her eyes—hey, kind of like you!"

El drew her head up slightly and scoffed. Mike laughed and touched her cheek carefully, "Don't worry, you are much prettier than Medusa and you've got much nicer hair." Eleven reddened but kept her eyes on Mike's, deep and intense. She knew she hadn't quite grasped appropriate social timing yet and so her focused stare would make most uneasy. But it just made Mike blush more.

"Andromeda was chained to a rock by the ocean when Perseus saw her on his trip back from killing Medusa. Andromeda's parents had put her there as a sacrifice to a god threatening to destroy their kingdom," An image of Papa flashed through El's mind and her

fingers stiffened across Mike's chest. He paused. "You okay, El?" His voice shook her from the memory and she nodded into his neck. Mike brushed hair from her eyes. "He fell in love with her and broke her free and asked her to marry him, plus some blood and death here and there for good measure. Now they sit in the sky together."

Eleven reached for Mike's left hand and began to play with his fingers. "It sounds like a campaign."

Mike laughed. "Yeah, sort of. Maybe that's why I remembered it."

"It's like how you saved me," she added, softer. Mike still caught it.

"No, El." He smiled shyly. "It's how you saved *me*."

By now the pair were wound in a mess of limbs wrapped in the big red and black blanket.

"You know, the stars," he stole a timid glance at El and then his eyes shot back up, "they didn't shine when you were gone, El. It was like the whole sky just burnt out."

Eleven touched a button on Mike's shirt gingerly. "The stars shined, Mike." They even shined a little bit in the Upside Down. What she would have given to know Perseus and Andromeda during her hellish time there. It would have reminded her of Mike, even though that was already almost all she thought about. It's what got her through her stay there. The hope of seeing that gangly, freckled boy was what kept her breathing.

Mike frowned. "Well, okay, they did but," he let out a signature Mike Wheeler sigh, the same sigh Eleven had grown to love, "they weren't the same. Nothing was. Everything was bland and gray without you. The world was dark."

"Mike."

"Yeah?"

"I know the world didn't get dark. The stars were the same, too." El smirked a little.

Damn trying to be romantic, Mike, you idiot. His shoulders slumped in defeat. But Eleven pressed closer. It was enough encouragement for Mike to go on.

"They were just different for me. You know what color the stars are, don't you?" Mike asked, fingers absently fiddling with the frayed hem of her sweater. A stupid question, he knew. She had proved to be brilliant, especially for having been holed up in a glorified cage for more than the first decade of her life.

"Yellow."

"Yellow, yeah. When you left, back to the Upside Down," Mike felt Eleven shudder and immediately began to whisper apologies. "Oh, I'm sorry—I," he breathed out. "When you were gone, the stars looked, I don't know," he thought for a moment and then settled on the word, "*brown* to me. But now they're..." Mike's mouth felt like cotton trying to formulate words that could accurately describe the images that painted his mind. He was far better at mathematical formulations, he knew. No words could describe Eleven, who was he kidding? "The point is that everything is better. Way better than before."

He felt El's hand slip into his own. It belonged there. A smile made its way to Mike's face.

"Eleven?"

Eleven loved the word on his mouth. "Mike?"

"I—," He wet his lips anxiously. She filled him with emotions no one had ever named. She made him burn and ache and cry and laugh until he cried and he loved it all. "I, um—"

He felt her trace the veins in his wrist and had to refocus.

Mike looked down at her, studying her eyelashes as they flickered and found himself imagining holding her there, under the stars, forever. "I never want this moment to end," he whispered. Her face lifted and she looked into his eyes calmly.

"Neither do I."

Without a thought, Mike's other hand floated to her face, fingertips brushing across her brow bone and then sweeping across her cheek and then skimming along her jaw. El felt her lips part as her eyes made their way slowly to Mike's own mouth. His breath stirred the hair that framed her face and all at once she was so aware of him. The way his leg was thread through hers and the firmness of his chest against her own. It made her agitated and bewildered and embarrassed but she liked it. Following his lead, her fingers flew to his lips, gracing over them like a child dipping nervous fingers into paint for the first time.

"Eleven—I," it was barely a breath. His eyes were dark, matching the twilight sky that cloaked the pair.

Before he could try again El's mouth met his, soft and warm despite the cool autumn night. Mike's eyebrows shot up but not more than a moment passed before his eyelids dipped and the altogether closed. Unsure and inexperienced but unwilling to let that stop him, Mike shifted his body above hers and pressed harder, hands winding their way into the soft hair crowing El's head. She sighed into the kiss, effectively sending a shiver through Mike as his lips caught hers again. Eleven clutched tight onto his shirt collar, dragging him impossibly closer. It seemed like it was over before it began when they had to tear away for air. Each felt the all-too-familiar blush find its way across the bridge of their noses as they struggled to make eye contact, bashful of the innocent intimacy they had just shared.

At barely sixteen, Mike was treading lightly, nervous of touching her still. He just loved being with her in any way he could. El's hand musing at his dangling ebony hair drew him back into the present. He was still leaning over her, elbows and forearms safely on either side of her arms. Eleven smoothed a piece of black hair along Mike's temple, still too shy to look into his eyes.

"I know, Mike," she finally replied. Her eyes looked fierce and her pink lips swollen. "I know."

It was like being back in the woods that first week he had met Eleven, searching for Will.

"I don't know why I just didn't tell you. Everyone at school already

knows." Mike had said after El pointed to Mike's scraped chin, courtesy of Troy. *"I just didn't want you to think I was such a wasteoid, you know?"*

"Mike."

"Yeah?"

"I understand."

"Oh. Okay." He had stared at her, this skinny girl with a buzzed head who was wearing his clothes. Something changed in that moment as he stared. *"Cool."*

"Cool."

He never had to say a word. El just knew. From the moment his flashlight caught her trembling in the soaked forest—the same forest they laid in now watching the stars and the same one he began to realize he felt something different about this girl with a number for a name—it wasn't like meeting her or getting to know her. It was like remembering her.

And El? She saw the Milky Way in Mike's eyes. The sky didn't—couldn't—compare. Those charcoal-colored eyes swallowed her whole. He sent Eleven reeling and orbiting across time and space and she often caught herself wondering if this was what love was. It couldn't be. This had to be more.

El tore her eyes from Mike as a streak of light ignited the sky. "Whoa," she mumbled, mystified. She never saw that in the Upside Down.

"What?" Mike turned, leaning on his elbow to watch the sky. "Was it a shooting star?" He frowned but as he looked at El again the wonder sketched onto her face warmed him. As long as she got to see some magic he was satisfied.

"We should come here more often," El kept her eyes up, afraid to miss anything Mike's sky had to offer. "To see more of those." Mike nodded, resigning back to lying beside her. "And," El's voice grew timid and Mike felt her lips brush across his cheek, "more of that?" A

sheepish but proud grin pulled at Mike's mouth, like the one that had surfaced after he had first kissed El in that cafeteria only a few years ago.

"Okay," he whispered quietly. El laughed as she nuzzled her way into the crook of his neck. They laid like that for what must have been hours, humming songs and whispering memories to one another when the crickets grew quiet until Mike looked at his watch and realized they'd both be murdered for showing up at their houses that late. Or, that early—technically.

Not wanting to be the victim of a punch from Jim Hopper, Mike rushed El home. "Bye Mike," El laid another kiss on the tall boy's cheek before climbing down into her window well, hoping to avoid waking her adoptive father who was likely fast asleep on the couch.

Mike held onto her hand for a beat longer. "Maybe we could go back out tomorrow night, to see more shooting starts, and, uh..."

Something resembling smugness crossed El's face before she pulled open the window to her bedroom. "I'd like that."

Author's Note:

Did you like it? Let me know. :)

-rosy